

Committee Secretary
SELECT COMMITTEE ON NORTHERN AUSTRALIA
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

Submitted online: northernaustralia.joint@aph.gov.au

To Whom It May Concern

Re: Inquiry into Northern Australia Workforce Development

The RJSA's purpose is to address mutual goals for our member organisations that focus on the attraction, development and retention of new entrants and existing workers to underpin the prosperity of Queensland's agricultural sector now and into the future. Our mission is to identify agricultural workforce needs and seek effective solutions to ensure a sustainable agricultural workforce for Queensland.

Industry members of the Alliance are (in alphabetical order):

- AgForce
- CANEGROWERS
- Cotton Australia
- Growcom
- Nursery & Garden Industry Queensland (NGIQ)
- Irrigation Australia
- Queensland Chicken Growers' Association
- Queensland Farmers' Federation
- Timber and Building Materials Association
- Australian Prawn Farmers' Association
- EastAUSMilk
- Supported by Department of Agriculture and Fisheries.

RJSA also acts as the advisory role to two positions that support the industry in workforce development:

- The newly appointed Industry Workforce Advisor role, who aims to provide support for agriculture businesses - with a particular focus on small to medium employers - by helping them address workforce challenges, diversify their workforces, and support workforce growth. The Agriculture Workforce Advisor will have an active role in assisting employers to connect to available education, skilling, employment and economic growth initiatives helping to strengthen their capacity to fill employment gaps and needs.

- The Industry Skills Advisor (ISA), who engages with employers, small business and industry stakeholders to provide high quality, evidence-based industry advice and intelligence about current and emerging industry direction, regional skills needs and training solutions, jobs growth and employment opportunities.

RJSA welcomes the opportunity to provide comment to the Inquiry into Northern Australia Workforce Development. We provide this submission without prejudice to any additional submission from our members or individual farmers.

Agriculture is the backbone of the Queensland economy and the lifeblood of regional communities. The growing world population is increasing the global demand for food, fibre and foliage, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, the world must increase agricultural output by 70percentage over the next 20 years to meet this demand.

This demand presents new opportunities for Queensland agriculture to expand production to feed a growing and more urbanised global population. However, farmers are feeling the pinch and the compounding impact of numerous factors including escalating input costs and workforce shortages are currently having a real effect on farm.

However, in the last year or two, these workforce challenges have become a crisis. We are all aware of the many factors that contributed to the current situation, including closed borders during the COVID-19 pandemic, disruptions to holiday workers and immigration strategies, gaps in our current training pathways and more recently the critical housing shortage.

Latest DAF (Department of Agriculture and Fisheries) modelling shows the average monthly casual and contract labour demand in all horticulture is between 15,000 and 18,000 full-time equivalents. Jobs Queensland’s Anticipating Future Skills are suggesting an additional 8,788 people will be needed to support agriculture, forestry and fishing in Queensland by 2025. That sounds like good news, but for farmers who are already struggling to find enough staff to operate their farming enterprises today, this is a daunting figure.

QFF has been collaborating with Government and Agribusinesses to find solutions to help the sector get through the short-term crisis and longer term, to put in place a plan that will build a secure workforce for the future. The resulting Queensland Agriculture Industry Workforce Plan2022-2027 identifies strategies to respond to skills needs and shortages affecting the growth, profitability and productivity of Queensland’s agribusinesses over the next five years.

This plan was developed by the Queensland Farmers’ Federation in partnership with Jobs Queensland and in collaboration with the Rural Jobs and Skills Alliance (RJSA). RJSA has played a critical role in guiding the development of the plan on behalf of the sector. The delivery of this industry-led workforce plan will ensure there is a modern and skills workforce ready to meet the growth and opportunities in the agriculture industry.

A copy of the publication is attached to be considered as material that can inform the inquiry into Northern Workforce Development.

If you have any queries about the plan, please do not hesitate to contact Dr Diana Saunders.

Yours sincerely

Ian Atkinson

Chair Rural Jobs and Skills Alliance